

A Thanksgiving Homecoming.

BY MARION DICKINSON

IT'S not most time for Letty to be back, father?" asked Mrs. Harlow, breaking the silence that had long brooded in the room. Her husband rose stiffly and crossed to the window.

"She's jest comin' into view," he said, his eyes on the point where the village road emerged from the screen interposed by his own orchard. His face brightened as the lithe young figure came briskly along beneath the arch of winter boughs. Letitia always conveyed the impression of abounding, radiant joy. In a moment she spied him and waved her muff gayly.

The Harlow house was but slightly removed from the street, its severe, uncompromising front unadorned save for the fan light above its green door. Letitia deprecatingly eyed this door as she hurried in at the side gate. It had always been a trial to her; but, to her petitions that it be replaced by one of modern make, her father had unexpectedly turned a deaf ear. So it had stood in his father's day, and so it should remain while he had any say in the matter.

"Something uncommon must have happened to Letty, mother," Mr. Harlow said, as the girl gleefully waved a letter in passing the window.

"Letty is always bubbling over about somethin'," she said, placidly. "It beats all the amount of pleasure she gets out of everyday affairs. And she isn't one to be always askin' for things, either."

"That's so—that's so," her husband assented; "but this is somethin' extra, I'll be bound," and he turned eagerly to the pretty vision that at that moment appeared in the doorway.

"It's a letter from John, with such a wonderful surprise! You read it, father," Letitia urged, thrusting it into his hands. Mrs. Harlow, looking at the pretty face with its straying dimples and radiant eyes, smiled sympathetically at her impatience, while Mr. Harlow fumbled for his glasses, and, drawing near the window to catch the fading light upon the sheet, began to read. But, after the opening sentences, Mrs. Harlow forgot her daughter. Her eyes dropped to the glimmering needles and the comely old face betrayed no sign of the inward perturbation with which she listened to her son's project. Mr. Harlow stumbled occasionally in the reading, shifting impatiently as if for better light, and clearing his throat at intervals. The letter ran thus:

Chicago, January 12, 1899.
Dear Letty: I have been thinking of you all a good deal of late, and wishing that I could do something to make you more comfortable. I know that the farm meets all running expenses, and that father has enough laid by for the future, so that you have no cause for worry. The house is old, however, and lacking in conveniences, and a new house would make life easier. I have been lucky in my copper stocks and made more than I expected, so I mean to share my good fortune with you. I inclose a check made payable to your order, and place the whole matter in your hands. I will suggest, however, that you build upon the knoll beyond the orchard, as there is a pretty view of the river at that point. Get a city architect to draw up your plans, but put all else into Mason's charge, as he is a reliable man.
Love to mother, father and yourself.
Your affectionate brother,
JOHN HARLOW.

With the last words, Letitia could not be longer repressed. "Dear old John!" she cried. "Isn't it amazing! Oh, I have so wished for a different house, but I never dreamed we would have one!"

A different house! But, crushing down her dismay, the mother spoke bravely, the echo of her own words still ringing in her ears. "It was true that Letty was not one 'to be asking things.' Should she stand in the way of this heart's desire?"

"Indeed it is amazing!" she said, heartily. "John is a good boy, and mindful of our comfort, though he has been so long from home. I supposed he sent quite a tidy little sum;" and she held out her hand for the check that her husband silently proffered. "Sakes alive! Does he mean us to spend all that on a house?"

"I don't know what to say," her husband murmured in bewilderment. He was puzzled at the manner in which his wife accepted this astonishing plan. He had supposed—but women were unaccountable. Then, as too, looked at Letitia's eager face and his own softened.

"So you're pleased, are you, little girl?" and he pinched her pink ear. "Well, well—it's hard to teach old dogs new tricks, but we'll try. I had always thought, the old house pretty comfortable, but mebbe that's because I've lived here all my days. Young folks like new-fangled notions, and we'll not stand in the way; eh, mother?"

Letitia looked somewhat surprised at this view of the question. She had not dreamed that there could be objections to such a delightful project. "Oh, if you and mother would not like it," she began, trying to speak easily.

Her mother heard the quiver of disappointment. "Like it?" she said, briskly. "Who said we wouldn't like it, Letty? I s'pose gas and running water and such fixin's will be real

convenient when we get used to 'em. You mustn't be surprised if it took father and me a few minutes to grasp the notion. There, now—if I ain't forgot the apples I was bakin' for supper!" and she vanished in the kitchen.

"But, father—" Letitia was still perturbed. Mr. Harlow took the flushed cheeks between his horny hands and looked fondly down into the troubled eyes. "Go ahead with your house, Letty," he said. "Mother and I agree pretty well in most things; and I guess we think it's about time you had some things as you want 'em. Because we're used to old ways doesn't prove 'em to be best. Besides, there's John's wishes to be thought about. He's remembered that view all these years—a mighty pretty prospect and a real sightly place for a home."

That night, when the glimmer of Letitia's bedroom candle was lost in the darkness of the upper hall, Mr. Harlow softly closed the door and tiptoed across the rag carpet to his wife, reading her Bible by the kerosene lamp.

"It's goin' to come harder to you than to me, this leavin' the old home," he said, tenderly. "Letty is a good girl and will give it up without a murmur if you say the word."

His wife put up her hand to the toll-worn one upon her shoulder. "It's you I'm thinkin' of, Samuel," and she smiled wistfully up at him. "It was your father's home before you, and the Harlows were always master hands to stick by the old things."

"If it's for me you're worryin', we'll let her have her way," he said, sturdily. "And, after all, the old place'll be right here. I ain't a-goin' to sell it." Letitia never knew how near she had approached to disappointment.

The interest in the new house, at first simulated, soon became genuine as the parents listened to Letitia's happy plans. By March their wishes were well formulated, and on a mild day that gave treacherous promise of spring, Letitia started for the city to engage an architect. The journey was short, and, in a brief time, she found herself whisked aloft in an elevator and deposited at the door of "R. Ellsworth, Architect;" this particular person having been recommended by a friend of her father. Feeling somewhat nervous at the magnitude of her undertaking, Letitia timidly knocked. A chair grated on the floor within and when the door opened a young man, with quiet bearing but alert glance, bowed gravely to her.

"Is Mr. Ellsworth within?" she stammered. "I would like to see him upon business." He stepped back to allow her entrance, then bowed courteously again. "I am Mr. Ellsworth," he said, as Letitia was about to advance toward a middle-aged man, busy with drafting tools in the north window.

"Oh!" Letitia could not suppress the exclamation; then flushed crimson. "I—why, I expected an older man," she said, helplessly, then was doubly chagrined at her frankness. A glimmer of mirth appeared in the young man's eyes; then, with a quick perception of what would set her caller at her ease, let his amusement have full sway. In a moment Letitia joined him and laughed until the tears stood in her eyes.

"What an absurd speech!" she sighed at length. "But it was the truth. I came to engage you to make plans for our new house."

"And now you doubt my wisdom and experience," he answered. "Let me—"

"I think I will ask you to undertake it," she said, quickly; then, becoming grave, gave him a clear account of what she wished.

When Mr. Ellsworth submitted the plans to the Harlows, all misgivings that Letitia might have harbored vanished.

In April the ground was broken, and through the fair spring days and those of early summer the work went merrily on. All Letitia's spare moments were spent in watching the walls arise and her dream take form. The architect, too, was untiring in his attention, running down at frequent intervals to inspect details. "It

is just what I would like to build for myself," he declared with conviction—"and in just such a place!"

It was early in October that, at last, they entered in and took possession. Letitia, full of rejoicing over the wide windows, the hard-wood finish, the convenient closets, the artistic coloring and charming vistas, felt little sorrow as she denuded the old house to make habitable the new. But, to her father and mother, this forsaking of walls hallowed by sad and tender memories was filled with unutterable regret. And when the key was turned upon the echoing rooms, now no longer home, the old people looked into each other's eyes for the comfort that neither could give.

Letitia fluttered down the hill to meet them. "It is all ready, now," she said, breathlessly, "except the hanging of a few pictures! I'm so glad there was enough money left for the new carpets and hangings. It has made it so much more beautiful!" Laughing and chattering she drew them from room to room, pointing out each individual charm and comfort, unheeding the obvious effort with which they tried to share in her joy.

"I wonder where mother is," Letitia murmured, one golden day, a week later. A half-finished stocking lay in the mending basket by a window overlooking the old home; but mother was not to be found. "I'll run down to the other house," the girl thought, uneasily, and, throwing a soft scarf about her head, hurried along the road and past the orchard.

Turning the knob of the green door, she found it locked, so slipped around the side of the house, glancing in at the window as she passed. Suddenly she shrank back into the shelter of the lilacs, for in the dismantled living-room she had discovered her mother, crouched on the dusty floor, forlornly gazing before her with sad, unseeing eyes.



MR. HARLOW STUMBLED OCCASIONALLY IN THE READING.

Part of the meaning of it flashed into Letitia's mind. To be sure, this was the birthday of Serena—little Serena, who died so many years ago, but who yet lived in the mother's heart. Letitia was touched, and longed to reach her mother and comfort her; yet all that she could do was to steal back to the front of the house and there, pacing back and forth in the sunshine, wait until her mother emerged from the shadow. Here Mrs. Harlow found her when her sad musings were put away.

"Why, Letty," she tried to say, with her wonted brightness, "what brought you here? I thought I'd slip down for a few minutes, and see if all was right." But Letitia was not to be evaded. "You have been thinking about Serena, dear," she said, lovingly, laying her cheek against the faded one, long since furrowed by tears.

"Yes," Mrs. Harlow said, simply, forgetting her role of cheerfulness. "I just had to come for a little while. She seems nearer to me in the old house."

And then Letitia's eyes were opened.

It was not many days before the elders noticed a change in the girl. There was a new gentleness in her manner, a vague wistfulness, that puzzled them sorely.

"Aren't you feelin' well?" her father asked, anxiously.

"Oh, yes—of course I am well," the girl answered, brightly, smiling up at him. But when she escaped to the hall and, half-way up the stairs, paused to look out through the diamond panes at the brown fields below, she saw them through a mist of tears. "I do love it so!" she whispered, passionately; but there was renunciation in her gesture.

A week later Letitia received a letter from John, but this she did not show. "All right. Do as you think best," it said. "Their happiness is our first consideration," which, though brief, was vastly comforting.

Errands soon called Letitia to the city, from which she returned tired and pale. Soon, however, she was apparently her old self again. The household was subsiding for the winter, when an urgent invitation came to Mr. and Mrs. Harlow to visit a cousin in a neighboring town.

"Of course we can't go," Mrs. Har-

low said, decidedly, though her eyes had brightened at the prospect.

"Why not?" asked Letitia, anxiously. "It will do you both a world of good, and you haven't seen Cousin Mary since she was so sick. Don't you think you ought to go?" The wily girl knew how to pull the strings.

"But she wants us to stay two weeks," her mother objected, with signs of wavering. "That brings it right up to Thanksgiving. It is thrown too much work upon you."

"Oh, I'll get Sarah Duncan to come in for help and company," Letitia said, easily. "I'd just love to have my own way for awhile." And, eventually, the girl had her way, starting her travelers on their journey with a relief that could hardly be masked. "It leaves so little time," she sighed; "but, with help, it shall be done."

Not until Thanksgiving day did Cousin Mary relax her hold upon her guests, her hospitable intentions being made more effective by notes from Letitia urging them not to hurry home. It was near noon when Letitia drove to meet her parents, her cheeks aglow in the frosty air, that had left its rime upon the fields and hedgerows. She eagerly scanned the long train, as it rolled into the station laden with home-seeking travelers, a little frown of anxiety puckering her brow.

Suddenly she rose in the carriage, unable to believe her eyes. Who was the tall man assisting his mother to alight? It couldn't be—

"Why, John!" she cried, springing out and leaving Jack to his own devices as she ran across the platform. "It is too good to be true!"

"So I thought when I found father and mother on the train," he said, as he kissed her heartily. "I hope you have provided enough dinner, for I have an old-fashioned appetite. Been traveling night and day to get here. Didn't know I could get off until two hours before I started. Thought I'd take you by surprise," with a quizzical look at the wondering, joyful face.

"All aboard for Turkey!" she cried, gayly. "Dear people, it seems an age since I saw you!" giving her mother an affectionate squeeze as she climbed to her side in the carriage, yielding the reins to her father. So gayly did she chatter that they had reached the new house before her questions had all been answered. Just as her father turned Jack's head toward the drive, she laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"If you don't mind"—her voice trembled a little—"let's drive down to the other house first. John will like to see it." A shadow crossed her father's face and her mother started to speak, but thought better of it. Letitia should not dream what it cost them to see the deserted house on Thanksgiving day. Would it—could it seem like Thanksgiving in the new house?

On, past the orchard, they rattled. Letitia's tongue running more gayly than ever, though the rest were silent. Thus far her father and mother had not ventured a look at the dear old place, lest its solitude reproach them; but, as they drew up before the gate, the green door flew open and Sarah Duncan, smiling and hearty, beckoned them in.

"It's pretty frosty yet," she urged. "Come right in where it's warm."

"Warm!" quavered Mrs. Harlow, not offering to move. Her husband's gaze was fixed upon the shining windows by which the old house welcomed him, as if with friendly eyes.

"Warm? Yes, dearest." And, springing to the ground, Letitia tenderly extended her arms. "Come, mother," she said, unsteadily, though her face was alight with happiness, "for this is home."

The dear old things had once more settled back into their accustomed places. If here and there a new possession had found place, it was careful not to infringe upon the sweet familiarity.

In the living room a long table was already covered with Mrs. Harlow's favorite snowdrop cloth and set with gold-beaded china and quaint old silver as on former Thanksgivings days. With a pretty air of importance Letitia hurried between kitchen and living room, now with glasses of ruby cranberry and again with towering plumes of celery. A composite odor of good things entered with her, luring John to the kitchen in her wake.

"I haven't had a chance to tell you something important," he said, in an undertone, drawing her to the window. "I had an hour between trains, so I ran down to see the real estate man in whose charge you have put the new house. What do you suppose he told me? Nothing less than that he has found a purchaser already! There's a hustler for you! Such speed is positively unheard of."

Letitia grew a little pale, and her lip quivered. "Did he say who had bought it?" she asked.

"I jotted the name down somewhere. Oh, here it is—Ellsworth, Robert Ellsworth."

For a moment, Letitia looked at him with incredulous eyes, then the color rushed to her cheeks. "That turkey must be scorching," she murmured, turning hastily away. But John looked after her with speculative eyes. The turkey was not scorched, but done to a delectable brown, and John bore it in triumph to the table.

With her hand clasped in her mother's, Letitia bent her head for the blessing: "Dear Father, we thank Thee for Thy great goodness to us—for the love that gladdens all our days." Mr. Harlow's voice grew more tender. "Bless to us, this homecoming, for Christ's sake, amen. Good Housekeeping."

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